DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 161 132 EA 010 949

AUTHOR Wirt, Frederick M.
TITLE The Neo-Conservative Critique of National Educational Policy: A Revision of the Revisionists.
PUB DATE Mar 78
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Asscciation (Toronto, Ontario, March 27-31, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Disadvantaged Groups; Economics; Educational Change; *Educational Policy; *Federal State Relationship; Finance Reform; Politics; *Resource Allocations; Social Action
IDENTIFIERS Mosher (Edith K); Wagoner (Jennings L)

ABSTRACT

This paper is a critique of "The Changing Politics of Education: Prospects for the 1980's" edited by Edith K. Mosher and Jennings L. Wagoner, Jr. The author contends that the themes of this "neo-conservative" volume are that (1) resources for schools are dwindling and the future of education will be bleak, and (2) political reforms are impossible to achieve and are not desired by the people. To answer the first contention, the author differentiates between the economic view and the political. Viewed from a political standpoint, improvements are being made and will be made in schools, especially in ways of dealing with problems, reallocating resources, and meeting the goals of accountability, equality, fairness, and the use of power. The bleak economic forecast is based on an assumption that the taxpayer's desire for retrenchment will not be reversed. According to the author, this self-fullfilling prophecy should be avoided. To refute the book's second contention, the author asserts that political reforms, while more difficult and slower in coming than assumed in the early sixties, are not impossible. Desegregation, for example, has made great strides in the south, and Title I funds have made an impact on test scores. Furthermore, these reforms and others like them have, in fact, sprung from popular pressure, although it is pressure from disadvantaged groups. (Author/JM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED161132

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

The Neo-Conservative Critique of National Educational Policy: A Revision of the Revisionists

by
Frederick M. Wirt
Department of Political Science
University of Illinois

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Frederick M. Wirt

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

Prepared for the national convention of the American Educational Research Association, Toronto, March 27-31, 1978.

EA 010 949

From the scholars whose ideas appear in this joint effort of the UCEA and the University of Virginia,* there emerge a few major themes, and like a good concerto, the variations are numerous. These themes, simply put, are:

- Economic resources for schools are dwindling and the future will be worse than the present.
- Political reforms at state and federal levels, stimulated by lay discontent, are either impossible to achieve or undesirable even if achieved.
- As a consequence, the tasks of educational administration are now more ambiguous and complex than maybe ever before.

In the few minutes afforded me, I wish to disagree outrightly with the first two themes. Because I could not agree more with the theme of complexity, it will not be discussed here.

A Tale of Two Disciplines

First, the perspectives of economic and political analysis in this volume tell opposing stories. The economists offer us unremitting gloom, which of course befits the "dismal science." However, the political perspective offers us extensive evidence of growth -- in the ways of dealing with educational problems, of reallocating economic resources, and of meeting national goals of accountability, equality, and fairness in the use of power. One side points to restriction, the other to expansion.

The economic gloom almost persuadeth, but we must not contribute to the mindset it encourages, with all its self-fulfilling dangers. We

---

*Edith Mosher and Jennings Wagoner, Jr., eds., The Changing Politics of Education; Prospects for the 1980s (Berkeley, CA: McCutchan, 1978).

must not, because economic assumptions at their roots are psychological and political, assuming as a constant an optimizing psychology on the part of citizens, narrowly based on only the material considerations of taxpayers. Thus, the economic analyses here assume that the current taxpayers' desire to retrench cannot change, and certainly not quickly. But remember the drastic reversal in taxpayer attitudes we have witnessed, from the pre-Sputnik constraints of the mid-fifties, to the expansive decade after 1958, and to the retrenchment attitude of the last decade. Remember, too, that by our gloom we contribute to disseminating the notion of economic stasis and decline, which is why I earlier cautioned against the self-fulfilling prophecy. I will repeat this caution regularly.

On the other hand, the political studies in this volume are filled with accounts of the emergence of new forms of professional adaptation to new demands on school services at every level of government. We read of newly adopted behaviors and newly achieved goals by teachers and administrators. Curiously, few if any of these writers see these innovations, particularly those admittedly "working," as evidence of the ability of the political system of public education to respond sensitively and effectively to new demands. What has "failed" is noted as failed, but what succeeds is somehow passed over without reflection on the system's adaptability and healthiness. So the political picture is the mirror image of the economic, the latter muttering "gloom and doom" and the former casually portraying variety in response.

The Neo-Conservative Critique

Parallelling this economic gloom and reflected in Nathan Glazer's essay is another despair which is quite fashionable today in the

"neo-conservative" circles. Frank Riesmann and Jack Culbertson challenge this pessimism, but only implicitly. In a longer analysis at another time, I will dissect this perspective of social and political doom, but let me now set out its premises and respond to them briefly.

The central theme here is that public policy either cannot or should not be employed to address social needs, particularly national policy for national needs. Glazer finds that no branch of the national government reflects the majority's views. (p. 30) Hence, what these institutions have been doing recently to reallocate resource for the social and economic needs of certain strata lacks popular legitimacy. Without ever presenting even crude evidence, such as poll data, he asserts that the "public" mood is not being responded to by government, thus, "scale is no longer representative . . . to what the electorate and their representatives broadly want." (pp. 30-31) The fault lies with public employees, whose demands are quite out of control at local, state, and national levels. Hence more money gets poured into the school system, but because employees absorb most of it, little gets to the target -- the children and their educational needs. Thus national policy becomes diffused and ultimately a failure. The correct approach that Glazer offers is both curious and ironic, requiring that national ends be met through regulation but without national moneys being spent for those ends. (p. 37)

What is to be made of this policy analysis, so forthright in its defense of what Glazer terms the "conservative" stance? (p. 40)

Let's start with his last recommendation -- don't provide national resources for natural goals. It is exactly what the Virginia legislature

thrust upon Jefferson when he sought to establish a statewide school system. But as Stephen Bailey and Jennings Wagoner, Jr., recount in this volume, no school system emerged in that state with such weak inducements. Assertion of broad goals, without an accompanying vigor of enforcement and without provision of new resources, is a formula for failure, rather like a eunuch proclaiming his love for a woman. This viewpoint at heart really doesn't want government to do anything which would reallocate the existing distribution of private resources--hence it is correctly defined as conservatism. With Samuel Johnson, this neo-conservatism urges: "How small/Of all that human hearts endure/ That part which kings or laws/can cause or cure!"

Contrast this policy passivism with the essays by Frank Riessman, calling for new forms to administer human services to replace the centralized bureaucracy of the old. He cites a shift of power in the 1960's and since from the bureaucratized professionals to decentralized administration. This shift emphasizes the use of consumer or client ideas and resources, counter to Glazer's notions of a centralization and bureaucracy being triumphant and insensitive to client needs (pp. 50-51). Riesman also sets forth criteria of effectiveness in service delivery which enable him to evaluate whether something works or not. Such specification Glazer does not provide, but if he did I think it would show the latter's class bias always inherent in conservative thought. Riessman's account (too long for reference here) is a positive statement of new and particular methods for effectively improving the quality of services (such as dealing with educational

deficiencies and improved pedagogy), while Glazer's is negative and based on challenging the entire action of a delivery system. Quite explicitly, Riessman points to evidence of professionals changing their behavior and doing so by the stimulus of new laws at state and federal levels.

The "Impossibility" of National Reform Efforts

What is at heart here is a neo-conservative revisionism about the use of national and state public policy to achieve new goals. This is different from another kind of revisionism which charges the failure of the entire school system to redress inequalities of power and resources; Diane Ravitch has recently taken this critique to task for its mistaken assumptions or selective use of history.[1]

The revisionism I have in mind arises from critics of national policy who claim either that the goals of such policy are impossible to achieve (i.e., ineffective) or that the policy is undesirable in operations because it frustrates popular will. I think there are two pivotal points in this debate. First, on the matter of impossibility or inefficacy, is it empirically demonstrable that educational policy reforms have failed? Second, on the matter of undesirability, does the belief in citizens' control, the essence of democratic theory, require their direct participation in decision making before it is legitimate and has this involvement been frustrated by recent federal policy?

The charge of the "failure" of Great Society legislation in social policy, including education, is so familiar that its literature needs not be recounted here. Certainly it is accepted as received wisdom

by numerous contributors to this volume besides Blazer. Why do I question it? I find missing in these critics either an appropriate time-line for measuring effect or criteria of federal policy effectiveness which would permit us to seek evidence to meet the criteria. Evidence is now appearing that the first critics of federal policy were bound to too small a time-frame to judge change, particularly when dealing with change in large social institutions. Successful implementation is far more complex, more stages are required to overcome resistance to change, local are as much to blame as national units, and so on.[2] Furthermore as to my criterion of researchability into effectiveness needs to be much more specified and applied across policy efforts, as Harold Burbach notes in this volume.

Are the findings so one-sided on the matter of the educational effectiveness of federal programs? The National Evaluation of Educational Progress last fall reported that the largest narrowing of the racial gap in learning in the South took place in those LEA's with the largest amounts of Title I money. That is, national resources were showing the effects intended. Too, desegregation itself has moved so far in the South that we forget the miracle in social change this reflects. But as Rodgers and Bullock clearly demonstrate, it was the strategy of federal coercion that accomplished the most change here, not stratagems of mediation, not enforcement, or otherwise permitting the status to remain quo.[3] And Gary Orfield reports in his soon out and massive study of desegregation that an extraordinary number of LEA's outside the South have voluntarily desegregated their small racial minorities.[4]

Too, the most recent volume of the IEA project found for the U.S. that within their sample there was far less difference between heavily white and heavily black schools than within them, leading to the author's judgment that, "Compared with ten and twenty years ago, considerable progress has bee.. made in equalizing educational opportunity between the various racial groups in the United States. Test performance differences do, however, persist."[5]

The point of my reflections is not that Washington has succeeded wherever it put funds, but neither did it "fail" in the massive sense that current revisionists would have it. Indeed, contributors to the Mosher-Wagoner volume repeatedly point to the important role of Washington in successfully stimulating new programs, e.g., in state accountability laws (Timpane), PBTE (Asbaugh), coordination of human service delivery systems (Kaplan-Warden), intensive compensatory education and expanding the school job pool (Riessman), and higher education (all this section's authors note this), and so on. These judgments appear sometimes even amid pieces critical of the federal role (e.g., Timpane). All of this suggests the need to rethink what we mean empirically by "success" and "failure"and to more realistically estimate time-lines for social change.

The "Undesirability" of National Reform Efforts

But sometimes the critique of the federal role shifts ground, so that for some neo-conservatives, even if it is possible for "the feds" to be effective, it is undesirable to them to participate in state or local decision making. The criticism cannot be answered briefly by political scientists qua political scientists, given their disciplinary

bias to run on about such matters. But the rebuttal would argue that the critique incorrectly assumes several propositions to be true:

1. The argument assumes that there is an empirical basis for the conceptual separation between national vs. state-local governments; but history and scholarship point to an incredibly complex intermingling.[6]

2. In the argument, local demands are conceptualized as homogeneous in opposition to federal action, when they are actually quite variegated; hence, the federal role is most often to judge between competing demands of local groups for limited resources and to seek a "satisficing" combination, than it is one of forcing something down the throats of everyone in sight.

3. The argument assumes that national interest, thought to be best met at the state or local levels, benefits all class levels equally, when in reality every policy differentially affects those groups entangled with it; at issue for some critics, I fear, is the unhappiness that certain groups are now getting a piece of the educational resources action.

4. The major assumption of the argument is that there is only one valid model of democracy. In this, the citizens directly make public policy appropriate for the ends of their local area, but this popular will is being frustrated. Two points here. First, in reality, education is the only public policy in the U.S. which has had such large local input through elections and referenda.[7] Second, as many of these contributors point out, most if not all these federal innovations

have sprung from popular pressure from some aggrieved constituency of the school system, that is, federal policy can be traced as much to redressing the ills of one frustrated local group as it can be to frustrating "local will" itself. The singular democratic model of the neo-conservatives ignores the rich and complex literature and practice of American political history, which shows quite well that we lack any such agreed-upon model. You will look long and hard in the Constitution to find any such model as now is urged.

5. Finally, while not explicit, the argument assumes that public policy for a nation should spring from our fears: fear of new groups rising to power; fear of challenges to the professionals' organizational imperative to control public power for its own goals; fear of mixing status and racial groups; and just the simple fear that things are changing, that "time is out of joint" and something must be done "to set it right." But many of us prefer to seek policy which plays not to fears but to aspirations for a better life. For both sides, of course, these are matters of faith, an important insight which David Wiles carefully noted in distinguishing Glazer and Riessman: "Philosophies and methodologies for logically determining 'appropriateness' in the formulation of social policy are, and will be, a striving based upon faith." (p. 120)

The Problem of Groupthink

Ultimately, I have two concerns about not falling too quickly into step with prevailing wisdom. If we look only for failure or only for success, the processes of "groupthink" will foreclose our percep-

tions and our visions.[8] Further, if we contribute to policy deliberations only negatively, we will shape school policy that way; for policy makers sometimes do hear what we say if we are consistent and loud about it. Joan Bissell recently noted that "changes in normative, consensual ideas about what education is and is not capable of are among the most significant foundations of educational policy."[9]

If we continue only with this cry that national policy doesn't work, that the feds or states intervene too much in local affairs, and that schools themselves don't do anything important (and there are different groups proclaiming these) then we surrender our critical capacity, which alone distinguishes the scholar. We surrender it to become just another part of the American public who currently distrusts all institutions. Certainly experience does not support such sweeping condemnation. And certainly the present volume itself shows both the gloomy side--economics showing us what can not be done--and the optimistic--educational administration and political science showing what <u>is</u> being done as American schools adjust to serve new clients in new ways.

For educational administration, such events raise the basic question of how their roles have changed. As Larry Cuban's recent study demonstrates,[10] and as Roald Campbell's wise reflections in this book point out, the pivotal role of professional leadership is undergoing enormous change. This entire volume displays the full meaning of that change in a rich fashion. As Jack Culbertson notes at the end, he is reminded of the Chinese symbol for "crisis" which denotes both danger and also

opportunity. But we cannot see opportunity if we see only danger, and of late all we hear are alarums about "things that go bump in the night."

My remarks ask the reader to reconsider the trade-offs between fears and hopes, between danger and opportunity. The time is due for a revision of the revisionists.

1. Diane Ravitch, "The Revisionists Revised: Studies in the Historiography of American Education," Proceedings of the National Academy of Education, 4 (1977), 1-84.

2. An introduction to this changing theoretical perspective is found in a first report on a longitudinal, in-depth study of federal-LEA interactions; see Neal Gross, "Theoretical and Policy Implications of Case Study Findings about Federal Efforts to Improve Public Schools," Annals, 434 (No. 1977), 71-87. For an even larger study reporting successful administration in this intergovernmental mix, see Syracuse Research Corporation, A Study of the ESEA Title I in Eight States and Thirty-Two School Districts (Syracuse: SRC, 1977), 9 vols.; the synthesis report, vol. S, by Robert Goettel et al. is the basis for my observation. A particularly useful review of the results of early Title I efforts is Milbrey McLaughlin, Evaluation and Reform: ESEA of 1965, Title I (Cambridge, Mass.: Ballinger, 1975). A review of the reviews of this research problem, noting more recent salutory findings, is found in Joan Bissell, American Education Research Journal, 14 (Summer 1977), 350-54.

A full-scale rebuttal to the charge of the "failure" of the social programs of the last decade is found in Sar Levitan and Robert Taggert, The Promise of Greatness (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976); on compensatory education, see ch. 6.

The major significance of using too short time-lines is set forth in Lester Salamon, "Follow-ups, Letdowns, and Sleepers: The Time Dimension in Policy Evaluation," in Charles Jones and Robert Thomas, eds., Public Policy Making in a Federal System (Beverly Hills, CA.: Sage, 1976), 257-84.

3. Harrell Rodgers and Charles Bullock, Coercion to Compliance (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1976).

4. Gary Orfield, Must We Bus? (Washington: Brookings, 1978).

5. Richard Wolf, Achievement in America: National Report of the United States for the International Educational Achievement Project (New York: Teachers College Press, 1977), 112-13.

6. An authoritative analysis of this complex cooperation and conflict, see Daniel Elazar, American Federalism: A View from the States (New York: Crowell, 1972), 2d ed.

7. For a review of research into this complex relationship, see Philip Piele and John Hall, Budgets, Bonds, and Ballots (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1973) and Howard Hamilton and Sylvan Cohen, Policy Making by Plebiscite: School Referenda (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath, 1974).

8. The concept refers to Irving Janis, Victims of Groupthink (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1973).

9. Loc. cit., 350

10. Larry Cuban, Urban School Chiefs under Fire (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).